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Abstract

The evaluation of instructicnal material to be selected fcr the school situaticn is discussed. Changing values of present day society are ncted, and three general criteria are suggested for selecticn cf materials. (1) The economics of the matter may be least important in the lcng run. It is nct what we prctect students frcm but what we can expcse them tc within the resources we have that is important. (2) Whatever we put intc the environment of the readers should be cf the best quality that can be identified. (3) Whatever is selected should be in the humane dimensicn, ccntributing to the search for life significance that is part of the human scul. (WE)

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EVALUATION OF MATERIALS FOR READING

"Criteria for Evaluating"

In a recent newsletter of the National Center for Educational Innovation, a short column entitled "Shattered Notions" pinpoints some changes in our value systems resulting from new technology:

> "--Television has altered our moods, art forms, and culture
> --The space ship has altered our sense of place in the universe
> --The Pill has altered the relationships of the sexes
> --The computer has altered our sense of personal worth
> --The supersonic transport has altered the nature of commerce, diplomacy, and language
> --Organ transplants have altered our stable concepts of death.
>
> In the midst of such dramatic changes, where is modern man's security?"

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Each of us could add to or build our own list of shattered notions, resulting not only from the new technology, but also from new knowledge about the nature of man, relationships between people, self-understanding, religion. The increase in knowledge in all disciplines

of scholarship requires each of us to constantly restructure our shattered notions about right and wrong, good and evil, proper and improper, moral and immoral, important and unimportant.

Many of us are finding that our criteria for evaluating or judging anything are at least shaken, if not distorted or destroyed. This is particularly true if we have had simplistic, either-or, single-factor criteria. The well-dressed lady may or may not wear white gloves; the well-dressed gentleman may or may not wear a tie. This is a time when the drama critic uses the amount of nakedness and four-letter words as a criterion for the new theater, when every child participates en masse in the funerals of those who met death violently or peacefully, but in either case publicly, almost as if each of us were there. We see deliberate and concerted attack on the taboos, conventions, inhibitions of conventional middle-class society. Little remains that need be, can be, or probably should be concealed from the young or from each other. Long ago the Roman playright Terence said, "Nothing human is alien to me", and not so long ago, Harry Stack Sullivan said, "One can find in others only that which is in the self." In considering the topic of criteria for evaluation, I find myself in the situation of the man in the cartoon, standing at the door of his home in a somewhat distraught state, answering the pollster with note-book in hand and pencil poised by saying, "I no longer have any opinion about anything."

One thing seems relatively clear, however. Teachers and librarians are no longer the guardians of the morals of the young or the proprieties of society. No one today wants to be protected or shielded

from anything. The criterion that materials for reading must be pure, sterile, and "good" is scarcely viable in a world where increasingly privacy is not valued and probably is not possible anyhow, where moral values have little to do with sex or language. The existentialist tells us, out of the depths of his despair and forlornness, that there are no objective norms for morality and no moral law. No acts are intrinsically right or wrong. "Right" is any act which is freely chosen without use of any predetermined norm or rule. It then follows that it is "wrong" only when the individual denies that he is free to choose, as when he acts on rules predetermined for him by his family, church or group.

Several years ago the NCTE published its little pamphlet called, The Student's Right to Read--a stand against censorship and restricting the access of students to important and worthwhile books. Courts are still ruling on the definition of pornography and inflamed citizen groups are periodically rallying in the schools to ban certain selections. We are wasting our time and evading more serious concerns when we try to base our selections of material to read on criteria selected to conceal, protect, prevent certain things being read. There is no way that the teacher, librarian, probably even parent, can stop readers from reading what they want to read; we as teachers might just as well not try. Basically I believe in the right of the student or anyone else to read whatever he selects. (Incidentally, one might also question the right of any teacher to FORCE any student or anyone else to read anything he chooses not to--by selecting only the one thing we believe they should read. Surely we can no longer operate on the dictum teachers have relied upon: Read it because I say so, or even, Read it

because it is good for you.) One might well ask, in fact, Why do we need to evaluate materials for reading at all? Why not just let them read anything and everything?

Some practical considerations do make it necessary for us in educational institutions to evaluate materials for reading. One of the most difficult problems of the teacher, librarian, parent, and just ordinary reader, is to SELECT from among the available material that which is <u>important enough</u> to literally take the time, or spend the money, to read. Evaluation leading to selection of material so that one can make the best use of limited resources to choose from almost unlimited supply poses real questions of priority and value.

One has only to look at the publications of the ERIC centers to recognize the impossibility of keeping up with professional publications; I noted in the <u>Times</u> recently the comment that in fields of scholarship, it is now necessary to produce bibliographies OF BIBLIOGRAPHIES on given topics. It is estimated that there are 2500 new titles of children's books alone in a year, probably 16,000 new titles of general nature. A few minutes in the exhibit halls of this convention demonstrates the impossibility of knowing about, much less perusing in detail, the printed material available.

Not too many years ago we could justify our limited collections of material on certain topics or various levels of difficulty by saying that nothing else was available. Today that is not the case. We are, with printed material as with much else in our society, literally glutted. Our ability to produce has outdone our ability to consume, at least on an individual basis. That is, how much does any one individual read?

Few of us read more than a book or two per day on an average, plus two or three newspapers, one or two periodicals. Some of our young people, particularly at early adolescent, high-peak years, read more. Nonetheless, including say eight or ten textbooks per year, how many books can any one individual read? Criteria are needed that help us select from among the available written materials extant today that which is significant, which has value, which can contribute to our programs, goals, purposes and needs.

Criteria for evaluating materials for reading in the school situation are, of course, somewhat different from those for personal, individual use, although the nature of good quality is probably universal and the questions about the same. Most of us could probably agree that a major purpose of the school is to provide instruction--to groups, in the group setting of an institutional complex. We have traditionally thought of materials for instruction as textbooks, supplemented by reference books and trade books.

The day of the single textbook in each subject, accompanied perhaps by a workbook, and, for enrichment, an anthology of the literary classics, is rapidly disappearing. This is not to criticize the textbooks--they serve a significant purpose in the instructional program. They will continue for most of us to provide the systematic sequencing of skills or concepts and, if used well, make a substantial contribution to the instructional program. New printing techniques, the advent of the paperback, ease of reproduction via duplicating machines available in most public buildings, make it clear, however, that restriction to a single textbook is certainly not necessary. Most teachers and students would

agree it certainly is not desirable if good instruction is to take place. While one probably uses somewhat more specialized criteria for textbook selection, in general the criteria for any printed material is very much the same.

In addition to the qualities of any given item being considered, the nature of the school as an education institution indicates the need for a total collection of material available for the use of students within that setting. Criteria must include provision for balance, range, and variety in the total picture. Horace Walpole is supposed to have said, "I am persuaded that foolish writers and foolish readers are created for each other; and that Fortune provides readers as she does mates for ugly women." Better than that we have some foolish writers in our collection, for surely there are some foolish readers, ourselves included. I look then at criteria for evaluating materials for reading in the context NOT of withholding or preventing people from reading anything they can or want to read, but in the context of trying to make available from the pool of available material those things that best meet the instructional needs and the changing social needs of the times. ¶Consider also the economics of the matter. Probably all of us who have anything to do with selection of materials operates within some kind of budgetary restriction. Some of us had the opportunity to spend substantial sums of money in Title II projects--sometimes funded suddenly. Usually, however, our options are in the other direction and we try to make our money go as far as we can, in terms of the criteria or goals set for our program or system.

Instead of looking at a library, or textbook collection in conventional terms, we may need to ask, What is the cost of nonutilization of books? What does it cost the school or library to have materials standing on the shelves or in the closets? From the standpoint of the publisher and writer, one asks the question, Will it sell? From the standpoint of the buyer-reader we ask, Can we afford NOT to buy it? The systems analyst considers the cost-efficiency factor. What does the item contribute to the goals or activities of the system? What are the alternatives? What does its use (purchase) prevent us from getting? (This is true it seems to me whether talking about a school system or one's own individual reading. What does it cost me to read the New York Times Sunday paper? A day's time and 75¢. What else can I get for 75¢ and what else can I do with my day? And is my day or my 75¢ more important to me?) Does it contribute to our goals and/or needs in proportion to its cost?

The fairly standard criteria for evaluating printed material are those you have heard many times before:

Is the item in an attractive format...art work, binding, quality of paper?

Is it of good literary quality...good writing, true to the nature of language, free of gimmicks?

Is it accurate...factually, and also in human terms?

Is it honest...so much of what is written for children is superficial, cute, shallow.

None of us argues with these criteria. Our problem is to interpret them. Zena Sutherland in the SATURDAY REVIEW column reporting on the National Book Committee award for a children's book that has just been established (first winner is DeJong's JOURNEY FROM PEPPERMINT STREET),

says the judges were to select "a book whose distinctiveness of thought or spirit was reflected in its literary expression." John Ciardi, in writing the citation says, "Mr. DeJong has the gift of summoning child-marvelous experiences to his narrative, yet of containing them in his sure sense of childhood." This is a high level of critical review that illustrates criteria for selection among many good items. Such reviews illustrate that what is good to one person does not necessarily appear so to another. What is good in one situation, one time, one community, is not necessarily good in another. At least, however, we can avoid selecting the items on the poor end of the continuum. Sometimes we opt for poor quality with the best of intentions; we hope it will appeal to the disadvantaged, the reluctant, the culturally deprived, the slow learner--those numerous categories we try to slot children into.

One thing research shows quite clearly is that children, and adults too, tend to read that which is readily available. They really have little choice until they become sophisticated readers, trained to search out new items. Hence, it seems reasonable that, given choices, one should opt for the items that are good, true, honest, and beautiful; we should surround all of our youngsters with that in the school situation. This applies to textbooks, to trade books, reference books, and current materials. Testimonials such as Fader's Hooked on Books demonstrate that good material has appeal and will be read by even the most disadvantaged, reluctant readers, even the hard-core juvenile delinquent type.

Having said that, I must point out that some of our traditional concepts of truth, good, and beauty are in need of updating. The classic

literature that was suitable to a society with little to choose from, to those who really believed that reading the classics would somehow lift us above the crowd, off the farm, and out of the factory, those who held a strong puritan yearning for propriety, properness and a Victorian sense of values, is not enough in today's world. Our literary heritage is, of course, contained in much of the classics, by definition. It must be available, in the best forms we can find. But this is not enough; it is necessary also to include timely and current works. Modern art, modern verse, modern language, is not easy for some of us to accept. Good literary quality in modern writing can be distinguished from that which is a put-on, pseudo-art, sham, trash. Not all that is modern is good--but neither is it all bad. It is clearly the mode and the message that the young understand. If you feel inadequate to judge it, "go where the action is." Ask the youngsters and try it out. They recognize the put-on, the shabby, the talk-down-to of the modern writer quickly, and will not hesitate to tell us so.

I began by discussing the shattered notions many of us live with today. Since writing most of this paper, I have seen the Cornell University community approach the brink of disaster and have been impressed with the spontaneous expression by so many of our students of their dissatisfaction with so much of what they see as their college experience, with the lack of what they call relevance, with their need to have someone listen to them, of their feeling that they are part of a system that counts them, but does not take them into account,--that someone, however paternalistic and well-meaning, is making decisions that vitally affect them, but about which they are powerless to express

their feelings. They are the product of our schools and our educational system. We can be proud of them. Many of them are incredibly naive. We have sheltered them and protected them and told them of the good life. They took us at our word and the shattering of their ideals accounts in part for their discontent. They accuse us of hypocrisy and what they see as undue emphasis on accumulation of "things"--including education. Fred Wilhelms expressed this in EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP: "Yet, rising grim in the midst of all this affluence is another set of hungers not so easy to quench...(hunger) for a life-significance they are hard put to find...but, rude or not, they ARE searching, searching for something they dimly perceive as "better." They are in a mood to study life--and man; to ponder what is of most worth, and boldly to jettison the junk."

Questions of identity, ethics and values, life-significance and commitment to principle are the same questions that our greatest writers have at all times in recorded history considered. This is the human dimension of our culture, what we call the humanities. Artists, writers, musicians, express for us all these questions of self and relevance. It is not enough to know <u>about these things</u>, for clearly the young do. When they ask about relevance they want more than facts, even knowing <u>about</u> something--they want to know what difference it makes. It isn't easy and I don't know how to specify the criteria that will help us select out of the affluence that which is <u>good</u>. Freya Stark wrote once that "It is not badness, it is the absence of goodness, which in Art, as in Life, is so depressing."

I have looked basically at three aspects of criteria for evaluating the materials we provide for reading in the school situation.

First, the economics of the matter--perhaps because this is the American hangup with money and efficiency, but perhaps also because that is the least important in the long run. It is not what we can protect them from, but what we can expose them to, within the resources we have. Second, whatever we choose to put in the environment of the readers in our programs should be of the best quality we can identify and find. Never are we justified in settling for less. Everything we choose should come as close as possible to what Joseph Krutch calls the bedrock principles of every work of art: truth--beauty or harmony of order--moral goodness. And third, whatever we select should be in the humane dimension, contributing with basic integrity to the search for life significance that is part of the human soul.

James Michener in his essay, America vs. America--The Revolution in Middle Class Values, concludes "The old values of demonstrated worth [i.e., education, competence, responsibility, optimism], constantly scrutinized lest they become ritual or cant, carefully weeded from time to time lest they become mere inhibitions, will probably prove serviceable for generations to come." It doesn't give us any easy answers. Neither does it mean we must reject all that which we have believed in. Among other things, what each of us can give is the clear expression of our self, our values "constantly scrutinized and carefully weeded," but demonstrated in our own lives. For what our students ask of us is, among other things, the courage of our own convictions.